The Builder.

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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1849.

ON the 26th of this month, the new Olympic Theatre, in Wych-street, Strand, built under the direction of Mr. Frederick W. Bushill, architect, will be opened for dramatic representations, under the management of Mr. W. Watts, the late manager of the "Marylebone Theatre," which was the work of the same architect. We give a plan of the new theatre, and a general view of the interior,* and next week we shall add a working section, showing the whole construction.† Drury-lane appears to have had its name from a house built there by Sir William Drury, a commander in the Irish wars, in the time of Queen Elizabeth, and who afterwards fell in a duel through a quarrel about precedency. Before "Drury House" was built, the old name for the lane was *Via de Aldewych*, and we have still the continuation of it, called Wych-street in consequence. Drury-lane was for some time an aristocratic quarter, but lost this character early in the reign of William III.,‡ and soon became celebrated for quite other inhabitants. Goldsmith, in his lines on a poet's lodging, speaks of "the drabs and bloods of Drury-lane;" and Pope uses the same term in the line—

"Paltry and proud as drabs in Drury-lane;"

Love of alliteration may have had something to do in suggesting it to both.

Drury House, in the seventeenth century, came into the possession of Lord Craven, afterwards Earl Craven, celebrated for his efforts to stay the ravages of fires, then so frequent in London, who rebuilt it, as Craven House. This underwent various changes, and was ultimately taken down. In August, 1805, Earl Craven granted a lease of the premises to the late Philip Astley, who covenanted to build "a good and substantial theatre, or amphitheatre, for the acting of pantomimes and other performances." This lease was sold to Elliston, and afterwards assigned to John Scott, the former proprietor of the Sans Pareil (the Adelphi), and is now vested in Mr. John Cavell, of Guildford-street, who married a daughter of Scott.

The old theatre, opened by Astley as the "Olympic Pavilion," September 18, 1806, was constructed principally of wood, from the timbers of an old man-of-war, *La Ville de Paris* (the ship William the Fourth went out in, as midshipman), which was given by George the Third to Astley, who had been the riding-master to the younger branches of the royal family, and was a great favourite of the old king. The king also gave the chandelier.

On the 29th March, 1849, the theatre was entirely destroyed by fire. The building was insured in the County Fire Office for 2,500*l.*§

On the 30th June, in the same year, the first brick of the new house was laid; but it was not until the beginning of August that the excavation was completed, and the bricklayers were fairly at work.

The new building is on the site of the old theatre,—an irregular plot of ground, averaging about 100 feet deep by 75 feet wide, with frontages to Wych-street (south-west front), Maypole-alley, and Craven-passage, and running back in the rear of the houses in Wych-street and Craven-buildings. The stage occupies the whole width of the ground at the north-west end, by about 44 feet deep; the remaining portion is used for orchestra and the audience.

The basement is a half-sunk story. The part under the stage is used for the purposes of the machinery connected with the stage, traps, sliders, &c., and communicating with it is a dock for scenery on one side; a music-room, a property-room, and a gas-room, on the other. Under the back part of the pit, and the principal entrances, are four large and three smaller dressing-rooms, separate water-closets, &c. The dressing-rooms have fire-places, and sinks with water laid on. The remaining portion of the basement is used for stowage and coals.

On the *Ground Floor* (and shown on the plan), are the principal entrances—those to the boxes and pit being in Wych-street, and those to the gallery and stage in Craven-passage; and there are additional fire-proof ways *out*, both from gallery and pit,—important in the event of fire; also the pit and pit-stalls, with separate entrances to stalls; two proscenium boxes and two private boxes, a refreshment-room, water-closet, &c.; the orchestra, proscenium and stage, green-room, porters' room, and entrance to stage, with separate way for horses and scenery.

On the *Box Floor* are six private boxes, three on each side; four tiers of dress and two tiers of back seats, in the centre of the house; a corridor at back of boxes, with separate staircases to slips and private boxes; a small *salon*, ladies' cloak-room, separate water-closets, urinal, &c.

On the *Gallery Level* are two private (proscenium) boxes and four slip boxes, a spacious gallery, with refreshment place, carpenters' store-rooms, &c. Over the sides and back of the stage are the flies and painting-room; and there are two best dressing-rooms, closet, &c., over the green-room and stage entrance.

In the *roof*, over pit and gallery, is the carpenter's workshop, 40 feet long by 45 feet wide, communicating with the flies and painting room.

At Q on the plan, is a fire-proof passage communicating with the manager's house in Craven-buildings, which contains some additional dressing rooms.

With respect to *construction*, there is a single span queen roof 56 feet bearing, in clear of walls; the tie beams (in one length) are 14 inches by 6½ inches; the queen posts, 9 inches by 6½ inches; the principal rafters and collar, 9 inches by 6½ inches; the purlins, 9½ inches by 5 inches, and the plates, 9 inches by 6 inches.

The main walls are 3½ bricks thick up to pit: 3 bricks above.

The gallery and box floors are framed with girders, 12 inches by 12 inches, one end into granite corbels in walls, the other end supported by iron columns, 4 inches by 5 inches diameter. To prevent the thrust inwards, from the great inclination of the floors (the gallery timbers rising three feet in five), the ends of the girders have been secured by iron ties and granite bond, 6 inches by 4 inches, built in the walls, flush outside, and the whole floor is framed on the principle of a horizontal truss, with abutments from the longitudinal walls.

There are two fire-proof (stone) staircases to the gallery, one for entrance and *both for exit*, already referred to. There are also two ways out of pit, and separate way from stalls and boxes, so that the house may be cleared in a few minutes. The whole of the entrances, passages, &c., including staircases (slate) to the private boxes and slips, are fire-proof. The floor of lobby round back of boxes is of slate on pugging.

The house is ventilated by an air shaft over the chandelier through the roof, a large ventilator through the roof at the back of the gallery, a tier of semi-circular windows between gallery floor and ceiling. There are also air flues in all the walls, communicating with various parts of the house, and four internal air shafts from the back of the pit and boxes through the roof; the upper part of each of these shafts is rarified by gas burners, which at the same time light the back of gallery.

The stage and machinery were designed and executed by R. J. Strachan, the well-known stage-machinist, who, as he tells us, has designed and constructed the machinery of eight of the principal London theatres.

The stage, 55 feet wide and 45 deep, is so arranged that any portion can be removed singly or altogether, as occasion may require. These movements are effected by means of multiplying windlass barrels placed on each side of the basement-floor, adjusted by a new species of machinery, by which the level of the stage is depressed into inclined grooves, wrought in the sides of the principal timbers of the stage, and thereby drawn off to any distance required; in point of fact, the whole of the practical surface of the stage may be cleared, leaving nothing but the skeleton, in two minutes; so that, if required to show a gulph or chasm in scenic arrangement, the means of effect are very great. The stage is an inclined plane, of ½ inch to the foot, and is arranged with four entrances, with working grooves for wings and flats, the whole made practicable. The traps are worked by graduated balance-weights, so that any degree of velocity can be obtained by setting them accordingly. The gas battens are the whole length of the proscenium, and are also hung with balance-weights. The borders are hung in a similar manner. The painting-room is at the back of the stage, above the "flies," and there is a frame working down on to the stage, on which the scenes can be placed, and taken up and painted with the least possible trouble. The scene repository, at the north-west angle, on the site of the old painting-room, will hold sixty pairs of flats.

The form of the theatre is an elongated horse shoe, with but few projections, so as not to present any interruption to sight or sound. The endeavour of the architect has been to get a well formed theatre, of good proportions and harmonious lines, with little extraneous ornament. It may be observed that the pit seats are circular on plan, so that each person looks directly to the centre of the stage. The ceiling and proscenium are *match boarded*, and canvassed for decorations.* The height from the pit floor to the highest part of the ceiling is about 36 feet. The stalls contain 38 sittings, the pit will hold from 500 to 550 persons, the boxes about 200, and the gallery 700 to 750.

* The boarding was first desiccated.

* See page 606 in our present number.

† In other numbers of THE BUILDER will be found views and particulars of the Royal Italian Opera House; the Theatre Royal, Drury-lane; the Theatre Royal, Lyceum; and the *Théâtre Historique*, Paris. Detailed accounts of the new Manchester Theatre, the Prince's Theatre, Glasgow, &c., are also given.

‡ "Handbook of London."

§ The writer had a pleasant recollection of the old Olympic Theatre. It was here in younger days that he first penetrated the mysteries of the *coulisses*, to superintend the production of a farce, and waited, breathless, in a side box, to hear what reception the public would give, on the first night, to "The Last Day."

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